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DOI:

[10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Neumann, E., Gewirtz, S., Maguire, M., & Towers, E. (2020). Neoconservative education policy and the case of the English Baccalaureate. *JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM STUDIES*, 52(5), 702-719.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466>

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To cite this article: Eszter Neumann , Sharon Gewirtz , Meg Maguire & Emma Towers (2020) Neoconservative education policy and the case of the English Baccalaureate, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 52:5, 702-719, DOI: [10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1708466>



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Published online: 03 Jan 2020.



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# Neoconservative education policy and the case of the English Baccalaureate

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## ABSTRACT

Conservatism has gained significant influence on education-policy making and debates about education in many Anglophone countries. While conservative educational governments have advanced some neoliberal governance trends, they have also introduced characteristic neoconservative education elements, notably in the area of curricular content. This article focuses on the impact of conservative ideology on curriculum and assessment policies in English secondary education and specifically explores schools' first reactions to the introduction of a policy initiative that is emblematic of neoconservatism, the English Baccalaureate. The empirical discussion relies on a mixed methods study on the reception of the latest assessment and curriculum policies in English secondary schools. The findings suggest that the current reforms are transforming school subject hierarchies, resource allocation across subjects, and what counts as knowledge in English secondary schools, and introducing a new culture of subject—and by implication, teacher and student—'worth'.

## KEYWORDS


Curricular reform; the English baccalaureate; neoconservatism; secondary education

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the most recent incarnation of neoconservative education policy in England.<sup>1</sup> We start by discussing the education policies initiated by Conservative governments since 2010 with a particular focus on their ideological foundations and the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a policy initiative for secondary education that is emblematic of contemporary neoconservative curriculum reform. Drawing on the results of a study commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (now the National Education Union) (Neumann, Towers, Gewirtz, & Maguire, 2016) we then go on to critically analyse the first effects of the EBacc. The analysis concentrates on how the neoconservative curriculum is enacted and how it infiltrates into daily pedagogic practices and transforms the pedagogic gaze. It shows how, in the wake of the introduction of the EBacc, neoconservative reforms are transforming school subject hierarchies with significant implications for how resources are allocated across subjects, for conceptions of what counts as knowledge and for the ways in which access to knowledge is regulated.

## Neoconservative education reform in England since 2010

Historically, conservatism has played an influential role in English education policy-making, particularly in the postwar period between 1945 and 1965 and subsequently in the 1980s (Jones, 2009). In

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this article, we focus on the specificities of the most recent iteration of conservative education policy which was enacted after the UK Conservative Party's electoral victory and the formation of the Conservative Coalition government in 2010.

Analysing the 'conservative restoration' in the US, Apple (1998) argued that the programme of neoconservative modernization had been co-constructed by four power groups, of which neoliberals and neoconservatives played the most influential role. In his review of the debates within the English Conservative Party in the late eighties, Ball (1993, p. 199) found a similar pattern; yet he portrayed a more conflictual relationship between these two power groups. Ball distinguished between the neoliberal 'modernisers' who believed in freedom of choice, and raising standards through competition and marketization as well as a curriculum matched to technological changes, and the neoconservative 'cultural restorationists', who sought a return to 'traditional' academic subjects, and who were committed to continuing the 'war on progressivism' using the tools of centralized regulation (Ball, 1993; see also Jones, 2009). In England, the 1988 Education Reform Act was a hybrid policy which introduced 'modernising' mechanisms such as parental choice and market forces alongside centralizing 'restorationist' tools in the form of a national curriculum and national testing. However, the curriculum, developed by what conservative critics referred to disparagingly as members of the 'education establishment', turned out to be more progressive than originally intended, and a subsequent attempt by restorationists in the early nineties to use a curriculum review to enforce a more traditionalist, nation-focused curriculum with 'real knowledge' at its heart failed (Ball, 1993; Wright, 2012).

Within more recent Conservative rhetoric, a neoliberal market discourse welcoming in marketization and privatization in combination with a neoconservative attachment to 'traditional' values has continued to drive education policy-making (Bailey & Ball, 2015; Jones, 2013; Wright, 2012). So, for example, the policies of the Conservative Coalition government (2010–2017) had simultaneously embraced the neoliberal ideal of the 'weak' state, as well as the neoconservative vision of the 'strong' state. This tension is illustrated in the introduction of educational policies such as the expansion of the academy schools programme and the creation of free schools,<sup>2</sup> policies designed to open up service delivery to new providers who were offered greater operational autonomy, concurrently with policies that reflected a desire to centrally dictate what counts as knowledge and how it should be assessed through the direct regulation of the curriculum. While the marketizing and privatizing policies of Conservative governments have received substantial critical scholarly attention, the impact of neoconservative ideology on the curriculum, and especially its stance on what counts as knowledge, has so far been relatively neglected (with Yandell, 2017; Jones, 2013 being notable exceptions).

In what follows, we mainly (but not only) concentrate on the introduction of the EBacc, which sheds light on recent neoconservative policy work around what should count as knowledge, whose knowledge is of worth and what should be taught (and examined) in schools. In this policy work, English Conservative government policymakers have greatly relied on the ideology of the neoconservative New Right in the US—the Core Knowledge Movement and the work of E. D. Hirsch in particular.

## Policy borrowing from the US: the influence of E. D. Hirsch on English curriculum reforms

Debates on what should count as knowledge are not new. However, under recent Conservative administrations, they have taken a new direction. The Conservative Coalition Government's *The Importance of Teaching White Paper* published in 2010 announced that a revised national curriculum was needed that specified a 'tighter, more rigorous, model of the knowledge which every child should expect to master in core subjects at every stage' (Department for Education (DfE), 2010, p. 10).

Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education between 2010 and 2014, and Nick Gibb, Minister of State for School Standards since 2015, expressed their profound interest in the influential work of US

cultural theorist E. D. Hirsch. In *Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know* (1987), Hirsch advocated for early 'knowledge-based' education with a focus on 'cultural literacy'. According to Hirsch, students' possession of the relevant background knowledge of general culture crucially influences their progression in reading comprehension, and hence students' cultural literacy is a key determinant of their future educational success. Hirsch argued that working-class students in the US were being offered a reduced curriculum, which had been stripped of crucial elements of cultural literacy, and that a socially just education system required a curriculum rich in historical and cultural knowledge to be implemented in all schools nationwide.<sup>3</sup> Hirsch's insights were directly referenced by Gove and Gibb in their publications and several of their public speeches.

In an edited collection, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* published in 2015 by Policy Exchange (Simons & Porter, 2015), a centre-right think tank, prominent English Conservative policy-makers, experts and practitioners paid tribute to the work of Hirsch. The Foreword states that '(w)e are in total agreement with [Hirsch's] assertion that a traditional, academic approach is the best way to raise standards in schools, and eventually to achieve social justice'. In his contribution, 'How E. D. Hirsch Came to Shape UK Government Policy', Nick Gibb, recalls that when he first encountered Hirsch's work in 2005 he '*had the strange sensation that Hirsch had taken [his] own inchoate and disparate thoughts on education, and turned them into an articulate and intellectually robust case for action*' (Gibb, 2015, p. 12).

Like earlier inspirational figures for English Conservative Party politicians (such as Cambridge academic F. R. Leavis and Victorian thinker Matthew Arnold), Hirsch's ideas resonate with long-standing conservative themes such as concerns about cultural decline and the failure of schools to inculcate a sense of 'Britishness', and offer a populist solution to the perceived 'crisis' of declining educational standards (Brundrett, 2015). This is the populist rhetorical strategy that Apple (1993) described as 'the politics of common-sense' in his analysis of the US New Right, a strategy relying on appealing to individuals' experiences and fears and rechannelling these sentiments into conservative directions, problem definitions and policy solutions. Offering a comforting promise of stability and certainty, this 'crisis talk' has proved to be especially appealing in times of increasing uncertainty and instability (Bleazby, 2015).

In January 2011, the Government launched a review of the national curriculum. A statement about the review explained that the Government's aim was to 'replace the "substandard" curriculum with one based on the best school systems in the world, providing a world-class resource for teachers and children; consider what subjects should be compulsory at what age; and consider what children should be taught in the main subjects at what age' (Department for Education (DfE), 2011).

An aspect of Hirsch's argument that has been particularly appealing to English Conservatives is the way he has co-opted the language of social justice more often associated with the progressive left, and harnessed it to the project of cultural restorationism. Hirsch links the unequal distribution of 'cultural capital' across social classes to differences in language acquisition, arguing that middle-class children arrive at school with an advantage that is further reinforced through schooling. Hirsch's argument that a 'knowledge-based curriculum' can alleviate inequalities in access to cultural capital, was cited by Gibb in a 2016 speech:

*'Knowledge', I hear people gasp. 'Surely education is about so much more than that. It is about creativity, problem solving, thinking critically, and inventing?'. Yes, I agree whole-heartedly that a good education is about all those things. But each of them is dependent upon, and impossible without, a fundamental basis of knowledge about the subject in question. Put simply, a commitment to social justice requires us to place knowledge at the heart of our education system.* (Gibb, 2016)

In his tribute essay to Hirsch, Gibb argued that '*... our reforms were based on a desire to see social justice through equalising the unfair distribution of intellectual capital in British society*' (Gibb, 2015, p. 15). In such ways, relying on the Hirschian argument, Conservative politicians have in recent years worked towards disaggregating social justice from its leftish connotations and presenting it as a key

concern of Conservatism. In doing so, 'social justice' and 'equity' have been rearticulated and redefined in terms of individual aspiration, social mobility, personal worth and ethical character (Bailey & Ball, 2015). Framing the reforms in social justice terms and thus making them unassailable is a critical strategy to 'silence' criticism from the left (Jones, 2013; Wright, 2012; Yandell, 2017). Alluding to another influential conservative thinker, Matthew Arnold, in an argument for a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, Gove had claimed in 2009:

*... (e)very child should have the chance to be introduced to the best that has been thought, and written. To deny children the opportunity to extend their knowledge so they can appreciate, enjoy, and become familiar with the best of our civilization is to perpetuate a very specific, and tragic, sort of deprivation. (Gove, 2009)*

The curriculum reforms of recent Conservative governments have given a new impetus to academic debates on access to knowledge and on the ways in which the curriculum enacts power relations. While those social realists who support neoconservative curricular reforms do acknowledge that knowledge may be used as ideology by the 'powerful', they simultaneously argue that its epistemic structure provides the means for knowledge to serve as a force for critique and change. One prominent and politically influential proponent of this view is Michael Young, who, with Johan Muller, has distinguished between the 'knowledge of the powerful', that is, knowledge which serves the interests of those in power, and 'powerful knowledge' by which they mean context-independent theoretical or subject knowledge which has its own power and objective value independent from the social context within which it operates (Muller & Young, 2019). Thus, Young (2014) has welcomed the Conservative idea of a 'knowledge-led curriculum', the emphasis on subject knowledge and the revision of examinations.

In contrast, Buras (1999), writing about the US context, has argued that Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Movement neglect the key question of who decides about the content of the national curriculum and sideline the ideological and political aspects of teaching and learning. By extension, the same argument could be applied to Conservative policy-makers in England and the academics supporting their work. While our paper does not aim to engage with this academic debate, our analysis in what follows—of what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is deemed worthwhile, what values are being enacted, and which social groups benefit—is based on a perspective that views the curriculum as inseparable from surrounding political actions and discourses.

In the following section, we turn to discuss the EBacc—an emblematic neoconservative policy that carries a strong imprint of the Hirschian approach to knowledge and pedagogy—and the policy discourses surrounding its introduction. We will then go on to present our research on its first effects. Drawing on data from this study we will suggest that, although the EBacc has been repeatedly advocated for as a socially just intervention, a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum in which traditional academic knowledge dominates risks perpetuating existing social inequalities.

## The English Baccalaureate

In his speeches, Michael Gove explained his commitment to more traditional forms of pedagogy and to what he called 'real subjects' and 'facts', and characterized the essence of his government's secondary curricular reforms as moving away from representing 'soft' and 'airy fairy' subjects towards more 'rigour'.<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the Government also announced reforms to England's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations. The key areas of priority were to be English and Mathematics with schools starting to teach reformed GCSE curricula in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics for the first time in 2015–16. The content of the new GCSEs was to be 'more academically demanding' (Department for Education (DfE), 2016, p. 92) and reforms prioritized terminal examinations at the end of 2 years of study rather than modules and coursework being used as the default method of assessment.

Alongside these changes in assessment, secondary school accountability measures were transformed. In 2010 the EBacc was introduced as a new school performance measure of the percentage

of students attaining GCSEs at grade C and above in English, Mathematics, the Sciences, History or Geography and a foreign language. Concurrently, most GCSE-equivalent vocational qualifications were removed from the secondary school performance tables that are published to enable cross-school comparisons. The EBacc was designed to encourage a more traditional curriculum in schools with more disadvantaged children taking subjects deemed to be 'core' (Department for Education (DfE), 2015)—mirroring the Hirschian project. In the policy rhetoric, it was repeatedly stated that one of the main reasons for its introduction was to combat the trend of students opting out of 'harder' more 'academic' subjects (such as Mathematics and History) in favour of 'softer' options such as art and vocational subjects.

Since 2016, the 'headline' accountability measures for secondary schools to be published in the performance tables have been the percentage of students attaining the EBacc, progress across eight qualifications (Progress 8), attainment across these subjects (Attainment 8), and the percentage of students achieving a 'good pass' in English and Mathematics. The purpose of these measures is to incentivize schools to ensure that all students are taking, and progressing well in, the EBacc subjects, particularly English and Mathematics. Progress 8 is based on the Attainment 8 measure which is a calculation of an individual student's average attainment in their best eight subjects. These subjects must fall into one of three subject 'baskets'. 'Basket 1': English and Mathematics; 'basket 2': three other EBacc subjects from Sciences, Computer Sciences, Geography, History and Modern Foreign Languages; and 'basket 3': three further qualifications which can be remaining EBacc qualifications or any other subjects from a prescribed list. If a qualification does not fall into one of these baskets, it is not counted in the Attainment 8 or Progress 8 measure. Taken together, these measures enforce a traditional Hirschian curriculum hierarchy deeming Mathematics, Science, English, History, Geography and Modern Languages to be 'core', and creative and expressive arts, social science and applied vocational subjects to be of lesser importance.

It has been the driving ambition of the Conservative Coalition government and its successor that a core academic curriculum should not be the preserve of a social elite, but instead the entitlement of every child. *'Though there are some inequalities which schools cannot address, the unequal distribution of intellectual and cultural capital is one that they can'* (Gibb, 2016). In what follows, we present findings from our study of the implementation of the EBacc that challenge this approach and its underlying assumption that a substantial emphasis on teaching a narrow, centrally dictated and conservatively defined canon of core knowledge will lead to a more equitable society.

## Our study

This paper is based on the analysis of data collected for a mixed methods study commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), to explore the effects of Key Stage 4<sup>5</sup> curriculum, assessment and accountability reforms in English secondary education (Neumann et al., 2016). The study comprised a survey of secondary school teachers and case studies of three secondary schools. The survey, distributed to all secondary school NUT members in England (totalling 68,833) between 23 April and 18 May 2016, was completed by 1802 teachers. Questions focused *inter alia* on GCSE curricular offerings, pedagogic approaches, the allocation of resources for the teaching of different groups of students and teachers' perceptions of students' experiences in the context of the new reforms. The Bristol Online Survey service administered the survey and the responses were processed and analysed using SPSS. Alongside the quantitative data, responses to open-ended questions (4926 in total across the 11 open-ended questions) allowed us to identify the respondents' attitudes towards these changes and provided an opportunity for unanticipated themes relevant to our interests to emerge. Ethics approval was granted by King's College London.

To complement the survey data, in the spring of 2016, case studies of three contrasting non-selective, co-educational and non-denominational schools in London were carried out to generate contextual, fine-grained qualitative data. Ten to 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in each school with a purposive sample consisting of members of the senior leadership teams, a range



of subject teachers, special educational needs and disability coordinators (SENDCOs) and union representatives.

Following inductive interview coding using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and the NVivo data analysis software, we wrote up case studies of each school with the aim of contrasting key transversal themes such as leadership and policy enactment, the reception of the EBacc and Progress 8, the social justice effects of the reforms and the schools' strategies of coping with and managing policy change. The three case studies enabled us to explore some of the contextual factors that affect policy enactment. Together, the survey and the case study data offer an insight into the first effects of the introduction of the EBacc in English schools.

In the following sections, we use the survey and case study data to explore how far official versions of what counts as knowledge have penetrated the enacted curriculum, how the subject hierarchy proposed by the Conservative Coalition Government was received and interpreted by teachers in schools and how it affected the valuation of subjects and the distribution of resources within their schools. The discussion is organized around three core themes that emerged from our analysis: a narrowing of the curriculum and marginalization of creative and vocational subjects; a stronger subject hierarchy and a concomitant redistribution of school resources; and a discursive shift from choice to guidance in mediating students' subject choices. In the final section of the paper, we examine how our case study schools constructed their subject option blocks in light of the EBacc and how they explained the changes. In doing so, we hope to illustrate some of the differences that school context makes to how the official government approach to what counts as knowledge is being enacted in English secondary schools.

### ***A narrower curriculum: the marginalization of creative and vocational subjects***

In high-stakes testing environments, schools tend to cut back on recreational and creative activities and reduce the amount of teaching of material and subjects that are not tested. Furthermore, within courses related to the tests, typically a restricted vision of the curriculum takes precedence (Berliner, 2011; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). One of the main themes of public and professional debates surrounding the introduction of the EBacc has concerned the effects of the exclusion of creative and expressive arts subjects on the numbers of students taking these subjects. The marginalization of creative subjects had started under previous governments, but the introduction of the EBacc has further exacerbated this process. According to the annual GCSE results tables provided by the Joint Council for Qualifications (GCQ), there was a 35% decline in the number of arts GCSE entries in England between 2010 and 2018 (Art and Design, Dance, Design and Technology, Drama, Media/Film/TV Studies, Music and performing/expressive arts) (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2018). The EBacc has also been strongly criticized on the grounds that it is likely to result in higher attaining students being less likely to opt for vocational qualifications, thereby 'altering the mix of the type of people who opt for vocational qualifications and further devaluing the status of vocational qualifications' (Cook, 2013, p. 13).

The overwhelming majority of our survey respondents reported that the EBacc has led to a narrowing of the curriculum in their schools, with 75% agreeing with the statement that *students had a reduced number of GCSE subjects to choose from* in their schools. Only 4% agreed that *the reforms would ensure a broader and more balanced curriculum*, with 87% disagreeing with this statement. Creative subjects, in particular performing arts subjects, Design and Technology and vocational subjects, were the ones most likely to be reported as having been removed from the curriculum. Amongst BTECs<sup>6</sup>, respondents specifically identified Applied Science, Child Development, Food Technology/Catering, Graphics, Health and Social Care, Resistant Materials, Construction, Engineering, Hair and Beauty, Travel and Tourism, and Leisure and Tourism as having been removed from the curriculum in their schools. Furthermore, Religious Education was often removed as a GCSE subject or relegated to being an option and thus taught in reduced time.



Respondents were also asked to comment on changes to examination entry rates in their schools between 2012 and 2015. Those who taught non-EBacc subjects were the most likely to report a decrease in the examination entry rates for their subjects. Unsurprisingly, while 72% of English and Mathematics teachers reported that examination entry rates in their schools had not changed in their subjects, 61% of non-EBacc teachers reported decreases. Eighty-two percent of teachers of creative subjects, 84% of teachers of vocational subjects and 75% of Technology teachers reported a decrease in examination entry rates in their subjects in their schools; whilst 69% of Geography and History teachers and 59% of Modern Foreign Language teachers reported that exam entry rates had increased in their subjects. Taken together, these findings suggest that a tangible effect of the new EBacc and Progress 8 measures has been a significant change in secondary subject offerings caused by a general move towards a narrowing of the curriculum and the marginalization of creative and vocational subjects.

The more traditional knowledge-focused approach to both content and assessment associated with the reformed GCSEs was criticized by several teachers for being ethnocentric, anachronistic, and unresponsive to the demands of the economy and the digital age:

*This curriculum, I think, has really squashed a sense of diversity, because we do fewer women writers, we do fewer writers of colour, and that, I don't think, is a good thing. Especially in a school with an intake which is as diverse as ours is.* (Olivia Cartwright, Head of English, Maple Way)

*So actually whatever exam board you go with it's the same kind of deal, really dry, nineteenth century texts, non-literary, non-fiction, and fiction, just a sort of obsession with the nineteenth century.* (Kaye Greene, Head of English, Oak Park)

*Monocultural GCSE English curriculum for students living in a global and multi-cultural society doesn't make sense.* (English teacher and union representative in a multi-academy trust school, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

These are just some examples of the numerous similar comments we received, which fundamentally challenge what counts as knowledge in the official curriculum.

The survey included an open-ended question inviting further comments on the impact of the EBacc on respondents' schools. Almost all of the 463 teachers responding to this question addressed the negative effects of the reform, with only three expressing hopes for positive impact. Typical comments included:

*It is narrowing the curriculum and making vocational subjects seem less important.* (Head of Year and Design and Technology teacher in a local authority school, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

*A lot of the art subjects were cut because they were timetabled against other art subjects so students could only choose one. More subjects are being dropped entirely this year, e.g. Graphics and Textiles.* (Art and Design teacher in a multi-academy trust school, 'Requires Improvement' Ofsted rating)

*Head is fighting changes to creatives and vocational on the time table because our students embrace them. But even he admits it's just a matter of time.* (Science teacher in a multi-academy trust school, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

*It is restricting the more able students to follow a broader curriculum which also includes creative subjects.* (PE teacher in a standalone academy, 'Requires improvement' Ofsted rating)

Furthermore, many respondents suggested that the new curriculum marginalized the creative aspects of teaching and learning in every subject.

### **A stronger subject hierarchy and the redistribution of school resources**

Both our survey and interview data suggest that the reforms have prompted a redistribution of resources along the lines of a stronger hierarchy of subjects. EBacc, combined with the other new accountability measures, is reinforcing the special status of the more traditional academic subjects, especially English and Mathematics. As one interviewee said:

*... by definition if you say these subjects are in the EBacc then you are putting a ring-fence around that as hallowed ground.* (Gareth Enders, Science teacher, Oak Park school)

Beyond the reduced availability of creative and vocational subjects as GCSE options in many schools, an overall redistribution of resources to subjects deemed to be core has started to become evident alongside a concomitant decrease in job security for teachers of 'non-core' subjects.

Survey respondents reported more lesson time allocated to 'core' subjects and more students withdrawn from 'non-core' classes for additional 1:1 catch up provision and exam preparation in 'core' subjects. Our results indicate that creative and vocational subjects were the most severely impacted by a withdrawal of resources, but that Citizenship, PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education), Religious Education, some other humanities subjects and technology were negatively impacted as well. Basket 1 subjects (English and Mathematics) were reported to have gained resources as a result of the reforms, and this was also the case to a lesser extent for 'basket 2' subjects (Sciences, Geography, Computer Science, History and Languages).

We found a significant correlation between the subjects taught by the respondents and their views on whether '*more higher attaining students are being entered for GCSE exams in [their] subject*'. The majority (53%) of those teaching non-EBacc 'basket 3' subjects 'disagreed a lot' with this statement, whilst for teachers of 'basket 1' and 'basket 2' subjects the disagreement rate was around 20%. Similarly, there was a significant correlation between the GCSE subjects taught by the respondents and whether they reported that their subject had '*lost a significant number of students*'. While 72% of non-EBacc teachers agreed with this statement, only 3% of English and Mathematics teachers agreed (see Table 1).

Survey respondents' comments revealed that increased curriculum time for English and Mathematics impacted negatively on 'basket 2' and non-EBacc 'basket 3' subjects:

*Over time, all arts subjects have been cut in curriculum time and teachers. Art was the last to fall this year, reducing from 3 hours a fortnight at Key Stage 3 to 2 hours and [from] 11 hours a fortnight to 10 at Key Stage 4.* (Head of the Arts in a local authority school, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

*The introduction of the EBacc has seen our SLT [Senior Leadership Team] reduce curriculum time below the required rate for subjects such as PE [Physical Education] and Technology.* (Citizenship teacher in a local authority school, 'Requires improvement' Ofsted rating)

*There has been an increase in additional revision style off-timetable days in the core subjects which has reduced contact time for other subject staff.* (PE and Drama teacher in a standalone academy, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

The shift in resources from arts to 'core' subjects was graphically illustrated by one survey respondent who reported that in their school:

*Dedicated classrooms for drama, media and music have been turned into science rooms ([with] sinks, gas taps, etc. added and sound engineer rooms removed).* (Head of Mathematics department in a local authority school, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

Hence, with creative and vocational subjects being squeezed out from the curriculum, the 'worth' of these 'non-core' subjects—and by implication their teachers and students—appears also to be tangibly decreasing as well.

**Table 1.** How did the entry rates changed in any subjects you know about between 2012 and 2015 in your school as a consequence of the EBacc?

	Creative subjects	Double science	Triple science	English language	English literature	Geography	History	Modern Foreign Languages	Technology subjects	Vocational subject
increased	354	314	413	162	259	666	665	595	41	46
did not change	723	442	383	811	668	219	235	255	191	115
decreased	417	83	111	32	61	77	66	163	680	833
don't know	210	768	713	605	622	653	645	607	706	632

### Guidance or choice?

One significant consequence of schools implementing the EBacc has been an intensified focus on tracking and guiding students. Responses to the open-ended survey questions highlight a substantial shift in the construction of student pathways; they typically contrast an earlier (pre-EBacc) emphasis on student choice to a current preoccupation with guidance. This contrast reflects a significant shift in the underlying philosophy of education reform: while previously both Conservative and New Labour governments promoted pedagogic work concentrating on the regulation of students' courses and enabling students to make their choices across those regulated pathways, recent Conservative discourse and the details of the new reforms assign a greater role to teachers in the guidance of students. Our respondents' comments about the narrowing of the curriculum typically included mention of students being 'forced' to take subjects which they may not be motivated to study, with many respondents noting that study choices made on constrained ground tended to be detrimental to the enjoyment of learning:

*We have ended up with students who were made to take a language as they were on a particular path regardless of their prior achievement and attitude towards the subject. Therefore, we have ended up with demotivated/disruptive students.* (Head of key stage and Modern Foreign Languages teacher, local authority school, 'Requires improvement' Ofsted rating)

*It's forced students who struggle with academic subjects to pick academic subjects that they don't enjoy. It causes them to lose confidence in their ability which causes their self-esteem to plummet. It's horribly unfair as it's putting square pegs in round holes.* (Head of humanities and History teacher, local authority school, 'Requires improvement' Ofsted rating)

These arguments were typically framed as an issue of curbing student and teacher autonomy:

*Students have openly complained that if they are classed as high achievers then their subjects have all been chosen for them with no freedom to express their own desires and career paths.* (Design and Technology teacher, free school with a 'Requires improvement' Ofsted rating)

*The EBacc denies students the chance to embrace vocational subjects. ... The arts have always provided an avenue for students to explore their creativity, their independence. ... I am absolutely against the dissuasion of choice for our children, it is both dangerous and cruel.* (Art and Design teacher, standalone academy, 'requires improvement' Ofsted rating)

Participants characterized the new GCSEs as encompassing a 'one size fits all' approach, which makes it harder for teachers to respond to the diversity of students' needs, particularly those of students who may be less able to perform well in written examinations. Teachers were especially concerned that 'forcing' students to take EBacc subjects would increase disengagement and disaffection, particularly in the case of lower-attaining students and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND):

*It will create a big gap between low and high achievers. Low achievers will not benefit at all leading to a bigger gap in society between the rich and poor. Low-income students will be at more risk of not performing and getting good jobs.* (Computing and Business teacher, local authority school, 'Good' Ofsted rating)

The conceptual shift from choice to guidance shows the profound effects of neoconservative ideology, and the impact that strong central control can have on how teaching and learning processes are understood and lived in schools. While the neoliberal discourse of curriculum choice has been widely criticized in the literature for its responsabilizing nature and negative impact on equity (Yandell, 2017), what is to be noted here is that the neoconservative emphasis on guidance and restricted choice brings new structural forces into play with potentially alarming consequences for the access and progression of disadvantaged students who, according to our survey respondents, are being steered into subjects they will struggle to perform well in, or alternatively in some cases are being 'off-rolled' from their schools (Long & Danechi, 2019).

## Approaches to redesigning the option choice process: responses from the case study schools

So far we have drawn on our survey findings to detail some of the core themes that emerged in relation to the issue of what knowledge is valued in schools, as well as some of the changes in practice that have occurred as a consequence of the strengthening of the traditional hierarchy of school subjects. Here we turn to explore in a more grounded manner how our three case study schools reconfigured their practices in response to the reforms. The teachers we interviewed generally rejected the suggestion that their schools would ever explicitly force students to pick EBacc subjects, and instead highlighted softer approaches that involved guidance rather than force. Our case study schools were arguably developing their responses against the governmental push towards ‘narrowing subject choices’ and ‘forcing students towards EBacc subjects’, and school leaders explained in the context of these expectations how they found ways to introduce some ‘fluidity’ and ‘flexibility’ in their pathway structures, whilst still complying with policy expectations.

The case studies allowed us to explore in more detail the ways in which contextual factors such as school intakes and resources impacted on school leaders’ space for manoeuvre in their responses to the reforms, and the extent to which they could escape close central regulation (Maguire, Gewirtz, Towers, & Neumann, 2019). The general message we received from our interviewees was that the schools were making determined attempts to protect their non-EBacc subjects and provide as broad a curriculum as possible, and none of the case study schools were requiring students to take the full EBacc. At the same time, by readjusting their option choice process, each school had developed an implicit strategy of coping with and accommodating to the EBacc. By looking at how each of the three schools designed their GCSE option choice process, we can explore how the approach to what counts as knowledge promoted by the Conservatives has been enacted by the schools and how it has impacted their pedagogy.

### Ashfield School: justified choices

Ashfield school is an oversubscribed, larger than average community comprehensive school which was converted into an academy in the early 2010s. The school, which has an ‘Outstanding’ Ofsted rating, is located in a relatively affluent outer London borough. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below the national average. Ashfield has the most relaxed and flexible approach to the option choice process.

The school has a long-serving, experienced senior leadership team whose members are knowledgeable about the reforms and have taken proactive steps to prepare the school for the new expectations associated with them. In relation to option choices, the deputy head explained:

*We’ve always had a very open option process at Year 9 in that we never put subjects into blocks for students to choose between. They have complete free choice across all of our subjects that we offer and then it was up to us in timetabling to make that work. (Fiona Newby, Deputy Head, Ashfield)*

Although the deputy head argued that students have completed free choice, in reality, at Key Stage 4, students are required to choose one EBacc subject and three other optional subjects alongside the core subjects (see Table 2).

Although none of the senior managers of the schools suggested that they ‘forced’ their students to take particular EBacc subjects, they did use strategies of ‘guiding’ or ‘encouraging’ students to take certain subjects. For example, a senior leader at Ashfield explained that the school has recently been trying to ‘encourage more children who are able to take a language under humanities, so we are not stating categorically that every child has to do the EBacc choice of subjects, but children have to justify why they’re not’. Thus, students needed to ‘argue’ their case for taking certain subjects.

**Table 2.** Option blocks for Ashfield School.

Core subjects	One EBacc subject	+ 3 other option subjects
Maths	History	<b>EBacc subjects OR</b> Media studies
English (usually 2 GCSEs)	Geography	Music
Science (usually 2 or 3 GCSEs)	Computer science	Music technology Hospitality and Catering (BTEC)
Physical Education (no GCSE exam)	French	Children's Play, Learning and Development (BTEC)
	Latin	Business Studies
		Drama
Philosophy, Religion and Ethics (half GCSE)	Spanish	Philosophy, Religion and Ethics
		Fine Art
Citizenship (half GCSE)	German	ICT (BTEC)
		Physical Education
		Ancient history and Classical Civilisation

Ashfield decided to bring the option choice process a year earlier, with students now choosing their options in year 8. Subject teachers interviewed in Ashfield School felt that the EBacc had a greater impact on subject choice in comparison to the past:

*The school has certainly started to push it [EBacc] a bit more in terms of options. So our students are in year 8 when they opt for their GCSEs, and there is now a bit of talk around these EBacc subjects. (Gracie Lambert, Head of Philosophy, Religion and Ethics, Ashfield)*

Ashfield was keen to ensure that their students had a wide curriculum offer (including a wide range of foreign languages) and every opportunity to take an arts and humanities subject in addition to PRE (Philosophy, Religion and Ethics). However, non-EBacc 'basket 3' teachers were the most concerned about the effects of the EBacc, even those who currently had healthy student numbers in their classes. There seemed to be a perception that, in one way or another, all subjects could 'lose' out. As Gracie Lambert, a religious education teacher explained:

*You've got pupils signing up to do three years of a course that they haven't chosen because they enjoy; they haven't chosen because it's something they are interested in. I think that has an effect on teachers as well. I know that my colleagues in Geography and History aren't positive about it because their classes are now filled with people that are purely just taking it because it's EBacc, and that already with the newest year nines is causing behavioural problems in the classes, and they say the dynamic of their classes [has] completely changed.*

The case of Ashfield school shows that even well-protected, advantaged schools have concerns, and what counts as knowledge in the wider policy landscape inevitably influences their provision and generates new pedagogical challenges around students' motivation.

### **Maple Way: strong recommendations**

A mixed comprehensive voluntary-aided school<sup>7</sup> serving a predominantly socially and economically disadvantaged community in London, Maple Way is the smallest school in our sample. In 2012, the school was judged by Ofsted to be 'Good' in all areas and 'Outstanding' in the behaviour and safety of pupils, and it also received a 'Good' rating in all areas in 2018. Because of its small size and reduced budget, the school is not able to offer a broad array of subjects for students. Yet, with regards to subject choice, the headteacher explained that the school was aiming to provide a 'flexible offer' within the constraints set by national policies and the school's material circumstances. She hoped that moving to a two-week timetable would provide some opportunity to save certain non-EBacc subjects:

*... what [the option blocks] do is they give students the opportunity to follow the EBacc if they wish to, so they can choose EBacc subjects. For example, they all can do it. But it's not like in some schools, a sort of funnel where you know you will do the EBacc and this is one option and one option is not the EBacc. It's not like that. So it's a very*

*flexible offer but we are a very, very small school so we can't offer significant flexibility.* (Penny Athanas, headteacher, Maple Way)

In response to EBacc pressures, 'core' subjects have been given extra time while the time for 'peripheral' subjects has been reduced. Alongside compulsory core subjects, Maple Way provides four option blocks, and students are required to select a first and second reserve choice from each block (see Table 3).

Some teachers suggested that student choice was being 'manipulated' by the options-choosing methods and the way that subjects were lined up against one another. For example, the Head of Humanities argued that this structure effectively pushed students towards EBacc subjects:

*We've got three blocks. Within block one we've got EBacc subjects, within block two there are EBacc subjects, so students are kind of being pushed in the direction of choosing them, so it's narrowed the curriculum.* (Andreas Russo, Head of Humanities, Maple Way)

Non-EBacc 'basket 3' teachers were especially concerned about the possible effects of the option block structure on student choice, as expressed, for example, in the following extract from our interview with the Head of Drama:

*And what happened this year is that [...] they put all of the creative subjects in one block, but not only that, they put triple science in that block as well, and that has been similar actually to previous years where we've clashed with triple science and I do find that a lot of the kind of brightest kids are, you know, given this quite strong message that they should do triple science. So you find that there are quite a lot of kids that are quite keen to do an art subject and they sort of get kind of filtered off.* (Maria Alton, Head of Drama, Maple Way)

Some 'basket 2' teachers also felt that the options process negatively impacted on their subject and on student choice:

*We have loads of kids that want to do a language but then it conflicts with other option choices ... so in general the blocking system has been a limiting factor.* (Celine Dumont, Head of languages, Maple Way)

Maple Way seemed to struggle to provide an adequate curriculum for those students who aspired to go to university. The headteacher, while wanting students to be offered a broad curriculum, argued that their futures should not be disadvantaged by being discouraged from taking more EBacc subjects:

*I have asked the member of staff who leads [our] options [process] to go back to students and recommend the EBacc more strongly because the process was led by somebody who didn't feel it was necessary at all and they should just do what they wanted to do.* (Penny Athanas, headteacher, Maple Way)

She also added that the 'reality is that the school is judged on its EBacc measure' so the school will eventually have to fall in line:

*... obviously, there's politically a push to squeeze out [creative subjects] ... you can't offer a broad curriculum like you used to be able to because, for example, Maths needs more time now [...] so you're cutting hours from other subjects.* (Penny Athanas, headteacher, Maple Way)

**Table 3.** Option blocks for Maple Way School.

Option block 1.	Option block 2.	Option block 3.	And a choice between
Computer science	Art	Drama	Citizenship
French	Engineering	Food	
Geography	French	Geography	Religious Education
History	GCSE Physical Education	Graphics	
Japanese	ICT/Business	Music	
Latin	Product Design	Triple Science/ICT	
	Textiles		

### ***Oak Park School: unconscious changes and gentle guiding***

Our third school, Oak Park, is a larger than average secondary school. The Ofsted inspection in 2016 found that the school 'Requires Improvement', but in 2018 the school was rated 'Good' with 'Outstanding leadership'. The school is located in an inner London borough of immense contrast and diversity with high levels of prosperity alongside some considerable deprivation. The school has a good reputation for providing high-quality SEND provision which makes it attractive to middle-class parents whose children have special education needs.

Oak Park School had faced a high headteacher turnover in previous years, but the current head has been in post since 2015. A number of the teachers interviewed in 2016 underlined the challenges of working under frequently changing leadership and felt that the leadership had not communicated explicitly about the ways in which certain subjects would be affected by the EBacc. The effect of EBacc on the subject hierarchy was felt implicitly:

*... it has effects which may be, not necessarily explicit, but, you know, again unconscious changes, and unconscious emphasis on particular subjects. Whether you like it or not, if it's more important you are going to spend more time at parents evening talking about these subjects. [...] I might say, great, Media Studies is the same A level as it is Chemistry, but actually I'm then going to say, 'but to be honest kids, if you want to get into university you want to do Chemistry'.* (Gareth Enders, Science teacher, Oak Park)

In addition to the core subjects, Oak Park's students are asked to choose one subject from each of Options A, B, C and D, including at least one in bold in the table (See Table 4).

Oak Park provides more time for 'core' subjects and 'basket 2' subjects through its timetabling arrangements. Core subject teachers emphasized the great pressure they were working under to improve results in the national examinations. Oak Park had received a specialist status as an Arts College in 2000 and the Head of Drama explained that, while the school sends positive messages about the arts, external pressures influence students in their subject choices. In her view, the option choice process should be about 'support on the one hand with a bit of gentle guiding of certain students on the other'. The Assistant Head of Inclusion, who was relatively new to the school, commented on the option process, emphasizing that students were not 'forced' to choose particular options:

*I've been pleasantly surprised by the approach of the SLT [...] At my last school most students were forced into EBacc. Here, although there's been very much encouragement, [...] the timetable has been written so you can choose a vocational route [...], and still do your English, Maths, Science, and a couple of other subjects. There hasn't been anyone forced into language, you know, very much an encouragement.* (Marina Leventis, Assistant Head of Inclusion, Oak Park)

Other teachers, however, argued that students were being pressured to choose History and Geography:

**Table 4.** Option blocks for Oak Park School.

Core	Core	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
English Language and Literature Maths	Combined science or Triple science (students who choose Triple Science must also choose an EBacc humanities subject and a foreign language)	Art & Design (BTEC) Business <b>Computer Science</b> Dance <b>History</b> Psychology Sociology <b>Triple Science</b>	Art & Design (GCSE) Business Citizenship <b>Computer Science</b> Drama Resistant Materials <b>Geography</b> Media Music	Art & Design (GCSE) <b>Geography</b> <b>History</b> Media Music Physical Education Religious Education Sociology Textile Design	<b>French</b> <b>Spanish</b> <b>Geography</b> <b>History</b> Off-site vocational courses Prince's Trust XL Programme



*[T]hey are very much pushed into that ... So yeah, I can't really blame the school for that, it's a national policy, so it's worrying, very worrying for RE [religious education], because ... ultimately RE teachers' jobs are sort of on the line to an extent.'* (Finn Holt, Head of Religious Education)

In Oak Park, all the teachers we interviewed highlighted tensions and uncertainties that were related to their subject and its place in the EBacc hierarchy. However, teachers also reported that the primary pressures in their work originated from funding cuts, and these were a much greater cause for concern for them at the time of the research:

*What's affecting schools is not the new GCSE, it's the funding cuts. So no-one sits in a meeting and says the new GCSEs blah blah blah. They say, 'we are losing the TAs [teaching assistants]' [...] We've got no TAs, they went down from something like forty TAs to now we've got like fifteen.* (Gareth Enders, Head of Chemistry)

## Conclusion

Reviewing sociological theories on curriculum and knowledge in schools, Cribb and Gewirtz (2009) argue that the curriculum is always bound up with social and political interests, and that it establishes and enacts implicit value hierarchies in the ways in which it defines what counts as rigorous and worthwhile knowledge. In this paper, through the example of the EBacc, we have tried to untangle how the value hierarchies promoted by and reflected in the newest wave of English Conservative education policies have transformed secondary schools. The teachers entrusted with the enactment of the reforms voiced sophisticated and harsh criticism of the Ebacc and its underlying assumptions borrowed from Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Movement. Our findings suggest that by placing a greater emphasis on traditional academic knowledge and written examinations, the EBacc promotes a somewhat ethnocentric and anachronistic perspective which values the knowledge of the white cultural elite and devalues the knowledge of other social classes and ethnic minorities. By doing so, and contrary to the claims of its advocates, the new curriculum may actually strengthen the social reproduction function of education. Ironically, in the high-stakes accountability context of English education, disadvantaged, multiethnic schools, which serve communities whose cultural knowledge is neglected or undervalued by the new curriculum, are forced to enact the most narrow and rigid interpretation of the policy. Conservative education policy rhetoric, deeply inspired by Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Movement, highlighting the links between cultural literacy and social justice found little resonance in the narratives of the teachers who participated in our research. On the contrary, the reforms were heavily criticized for being detached from the current social context of schools and social expectations surrounding schooling. While in following the Hirschian ideal, Conservative politicians argue that 'hard' knowledge offers students access to cultural capital and can mitigate social inequalities, our respondents raised serious concerns about the ways in which stronger guidance and the new examination procedures could demotivate some students and eventually make it more difficult for disadvantaged students and schools to succeed. This is because the Hirschian concept of cultural literacy downplays the educational relevance and consequences of socio-cultural and material differences between families and schools, and is thereby used to justify policies which deny differential treatment and additional resources for at-risk groups and disadvantaged schools.

Our findings indicate that, in a Hirschian spirit, the reforms have successfully reordered what counts as worthwhile knowledge in English schools. The reforms are having a profound effect on the hierarchy of subjects, reinforcing the special status of the more traditional academic subjects through a re-ordering of time and workforce allocations. In response to the new EBacc and Progress 8 measures, secondary schools have made significant changes to their subject offerings, resulting in many cases in a substantial narrowing of the curriculum and the marginalization of creative and vocational subjects. Furthermore, subjects such as Citizenship, PSHE and Religious Education, which aim to foster social skills and critical and independent thinking as well as civic and political knowledge, are being negatively impacted. The Ebacc provides a striking example of

the consequences of putting the Hirschian conception of knowledge into practice. Its priorities, defined by an extremely narrow view of schooling and knowledge transmission, have led to a curriculum which greatly devalues the non-academic, creative and social functions of education.

We have primarily focussed here on how the status of subjects and that of the core and non-core subject teachers has changed in the wake of the reforms, and only briefly on its damaging effects on less advantaged student groups. However, our data suggest that the devaluing of creative and vocational subjects and the narrowing of the curriculum raise some significant equity concerns. One outcome reported by teachers in the survey and in the case study interviews is that subjects whose curricular content and exam requirements have been redesigned with the intention of making them more rigorous are now less accessible to 'at risk' groups of students. Although the extent to which schools are aligning their practices to the new policy environment depends on their material and professional circumstances, as well as their Ofsted ratings (Maguire et al., 2019), overall, most of our survey respondents and case study participants reported a narrowing of the curriculum offer in their schools and a redistribution of resources to the benefit of 'core' academic subjects.

The case studies have highlighted that schools have primarily responded to the EBacc through changing their subject blocks and their option choice process. It is through the option blocks that teachers seemed to be most aware of how the EBacc was being enacted in their schools and departments. Their main concern was with how the EBacc translated into the option choice process and how this affected their subjects. School leaders rejected the idea that their schools would ever explicitly force students to pick EBacc subjects, and the case studies highlighted how schools have found ways to introduce some fluidity and flexibility into their pathway structures, whilst still complying with policy expectations. However, while measures to force students into selecting certain subjects were rejected by teachers, it was evident that tactics designed to strongly encourage particular choices were being used in some schools.

The case of Ashfield school shows that, even in well-protected, advantaged schools, teachers have concerns about a potential narrowing of the curriculum, and that what counts as worthwhile knowledge in official discourse inevitably influences their provision. Maple Way's room for manoeuvre is extremely constrained by its material conditions and small student numbers, and the school has had to enforce stronger guidance and restrict option choices more directly to respond to official policy expectations. In this school, those students who were identified as being of 'higher ability' were, according to some respondents, being driven away from arts and practical subjects. In Oak Park, managerial and financial instabilities posed the main challenges to co-ordinated policy implementation, and while earlier practices to some extent have been sustained, teachers are working under conditions of constant uncertainty regarding the future of their subjects.

Curricular policies produce particular kinds of 'pedagogic gaze' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2009). Curriculum changes inspired by a Hirschian conception of what counts as worthwhile school knowledge have prompted a significant conceptual shift from a framing centred on student choice to a greater emphasis on teacher guidance. Our research participants expressed frustration about such new role expectations and they passionately communicated the difficulties they experienced in trying to reconcile a pedagogical ethos centred on enabling students to make the most suitable choices in the light of their own biographies with a more authoritative and prescriptive teacher role which actively guides students towards pathways which the school defines as being in their best interests and/or the school's best interests (Greany & Higham, 2018). The implementation of the Ebacc-led curriculum, which policy-makers and government leaders argue is in the best interests of disadvantaged students, raised profound concerns for some of our participants who suggested that it demotivates students and sets low achievers up to fail. These teachers felt caught between what they thought to be the students' best interests and their school's interest, as defined by its performance in relation to the new assessment measures. The competing discourses of choice versus guidance shed light on how schools and teachers seek both continuity and the best possible compromise between the contrasting priorities of progressive and conservative pedagogies. In this negotiation process, however, as the pedagogical gaze is

gradually reoriented by neoconservative policy emphases, teacher subjectivities are inevitably being reshaped, and a new culture of subject, and by implication, teacher and student 'worth' is emerging.

## Notes

1. We use the term *neoconservative* in the sense used in the critical sociology literature, for example, in the works of Apple (1998, 2006) and Bailey and Ball (2015). We use a capital C when we are referring to the English Conservative Party and to governments led by the Conservative Party and a lower-case c when referring to conservatism and neoconservatism as ideologies.
2. Both academies and free schools are funded and run independently from local authorities. The academies programme was originally established in 2000 by the first New Labour government (1997–2001).
3. The assumption that the introduction of the core curriculum rich in academic knowledge would favour social justice was heavily criticized by US academics. For a comprehensive critique of the incoherent assumptions providing the basis of Hirsch's argument see Buras 1999.
4. The new primary curriculum implemented in 2014 had Hirsch's ideas at its heart too.
5. Key Stage 4 covers the 2 years of schooling when students are in school years 10 and 11 and usually aged between 14 and 16.
6. Work-related or vocational qualifications issued by the Business and Technology Education Council.
7. A long-standing category of state-funded schools, voluntary aided schools are those to which a foundation or trust contributes running costs and has an influence on the running of the school.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [EN], upon reasonable request.

## Funding

This work was supported by the National Education Union (NEU) and a doctoral fellowship funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

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